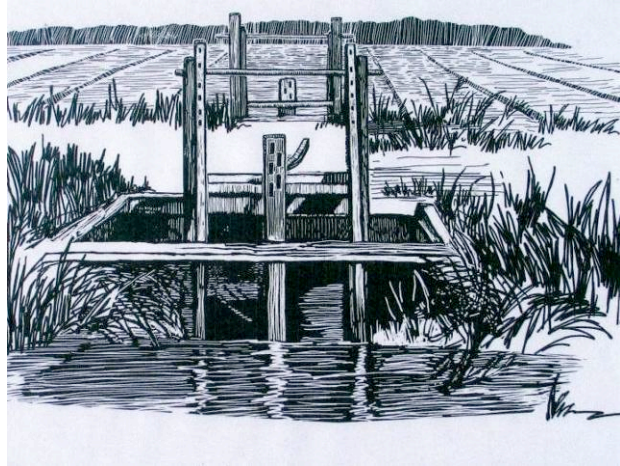


A History of White Oak Plantation

The earliest recorded history of White Oak Plantation dates back to April 16, 1768 when the British Governor of Florida made a land grant to Andrew Way, his deputy surveyor of lands. In the course of his duties, Way had come across the property and petitioned the Governor for title to four hundred acres of “an excellent tide river swamp” on the Florida side of the St. Marys River. Three years later, Jermyn Wright, also a recipient of a land grant on the St. Marys, purchased Way’s property. At that time, the land was still in an “uncleared state” and “entirely covered in woods.”



Gates, such as illustrated above, were used to control the flow of river water in and out of the rice fields.



Rice farming was a labor intensive endeavor requiring a large number of slaves.

Among other things, the plantation produced timber and food stores for naval consumption. After removing the stands of cypress from the swamp, Wright also began the first cultivation of rice on the property, establishing the southernmost rice plantation on the Atlantic coast. Upland from the fields were quarters for twenty-five slaves, a forty-foot square frame and shingled house for the overseer, and a framed corn house and barn. In late 1775, a band of revolutionary troops attacked the Plantation, destroying the fields and burning the buildings to the ground.



Rice was pounded to separate the hull from the grain.

Over the next fifty years, Florida was governed by four different nations and ownership of this property has been difficult to fully trace over time. However, it is known that by 1833, Zephaniah Kingsley, a pre-Civil War agricultural baron, had become the Plantation’s sole owner. For reasons unknown, he mortgaged the property to the heirs of John Fraser, whose five children were born of an African woman: her status, slave or free, is not known. Fraser’s sister sued the executors for the title to this large estate and its fifty slaves, claiming his will was fraudulent. No doubt the fact that Fraser’s five children were mulattos played a role in her suit. The court dismissed her claim and the Plantation was purchased by Abraham Bessent, a St. Marys, GA shopkeeper, in 1842. This sale included extensive machinery and 118 slaves, 109 whose names were recorded on the deed.

Before the Civil War, White Oak had approximately 350 acres of rice paddy in cultivation. Rice farming was a far riskier business than the cultivation of cotton and other agricultural products. It was extraordinarily labor intensive and required a capital outlay of approximately \$100,000. Complete failure of a rice plantation loomed one bad harvest away. From the Carolinas to the St. Marys, the rice economy depended on the know-how and agricultural implements brought by the West African slaves. During the Civil War, most planters left their rice plantations and permanently relocated to their summer estates. It is probable that the Plantation was abandoned at this time. After the war, it is likely the planter had neither the capital nor the labor required to rework the fields, and thus the agricultural production of rice was abandoned. It is speculated that the property went into receivership, but the story resumes a few years later when Abraham Bessent's daughter Maria married Irish immigrant Samuel Burns, probably in the early 1870's, and bought White Oak from Nassau County commissioners in 1874. Bessent and her husband ran White Oak as a 2,850-acre rice plantation. Burns died in 1888 and his widow continued to run the plantation herself until she sold it in 1893 for \$1 to an E. N. Stone. Today, the abandoned rice paddies on White Oak are still visible, and across the road from the fields, there still stands a ruin from the Kingsley era.



The kitchen and main house still stand at the Kingsley Plantation located on Fort George Island, FL.



The rice fields of White Oak are still in evidence along the St. Marys River. Near the abandoned fields stand remnants of that era. A granary is located in a nearby cheetah pen (left). Near the river are the remains of a rice mill (below). Dr. Shaeffer, of the University of North Florida, has spent many years studying the ruins at White Oak. The classic tabby structures were probably built during Zephaniah Kingsley's time of ownership.

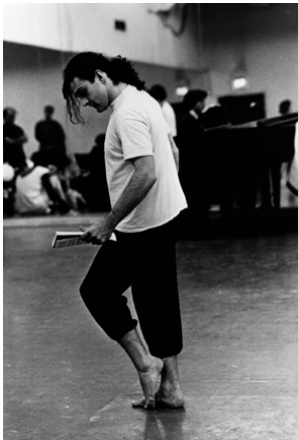




White Oak Plantation encompassed over 350 acres of rice fields. Many of the canals and ditches are still intact today, over 200 years later.

The Gilman family acquired White Oak in 1938. This 7,400-acre property has been variously used for timber production, the breeding, raising and training of horses, and recreational programs as part of the marketing program of Gilman Paper Company. In 1982, Howard Gilman initiated a significant

program for the conservation and propagation of threatened and endangered species on the property. Since 1993, The Howard Gilman Foundation has hosted a variety of national and international conferences and seminars at White Oak directly related to its three fields of interest: arts and culture, conservation and the environment, and medical research and care. White Oak is also home to the Mikhail Baryshnikov Dance Studio which houses an active artists' residency program, where noted choreographers and directors, such as Mark Morris, Julio Bocca, David Parsons, Alonzo King and Anne Bogart, have developed and refined their work. From its beginnings as part of the harsh agrarian, slave economy of the South, White Oak has evolved into a center for the preservation of endangered species, an artistic retreat, and a gathering place where people from around the world can discuss some of the most important issues facing mankind's natural and cultural heritage.



Mark Morris, Alonzo King and Mikhail Baryshnikov (left to right) are three of many performance artists who fine tuned their craft at White Oak. The artistic residency program allows upcoming artists to develop their work in the quiet and inspiring environment of White Oak.